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ABOUT FACE

For years, I've been told that I look one way, when how I feel inside is another. And I've wondered *Is my face a disembodied entity with a life and mind of its own? Do I have a mood ring of a face, obscured by dark storm clouds of anger and sadness?* In photographs, my default face often looks serious and pensive, and I've learned that my introverted social awkwardness can read as unfriendly, stern, or aloof.

"Cheer up, it'll be okay," a stranger with kind eyes and a sympathetic voice once said. I felt perfectly fine at the time. Perhaps a little tired. Encounters like this have plagued me for decades. There've been times when someone's comments hit the mark, when, in fact, I *was* angry or sad. But on many other occasions, I've felt betrayed by my face, misrepresented by it, and, at times, deeply misunderstood because of it.

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FACE FACTS

Apparently, I'm not alone. In *The Face: A Time Code*, author and Zen Buddhist priest Ruth Ozeki conducts an experiment in immersive attention in which she explores her own reflection in a mirror for a period of three hours. The book documents Ozeki's observations as she examines the physical features of her face, the memories of her family that arise, and her reflections

on gender, race, identity, and aging. The author observes that "as [she gets] older, [her] expressions seem to have gotten more exaggerated and severe." She writes that on book tours she's frequently photographed and notes, "I'm often caught with really frightening expressions on my face—expressions that look like disdain, or disapproval, or contempt, when I'm probably just thinking about what I want to eat for dinner."

Like Ozeki, my inside and outside selves often feel incongruous and out of sync. Each of us, our faces at odds with whom we feel ourselves to be.

Ozeki also discusses the Zen koan "what is your original face?" She writes that our original face is the undivided self, before the duality in our natures—the Jekyll and Hyde within us all—intrudes. In Indian mythology, the duality of the individual is addressed in the many manifestations of its gods and goddesses. The Hindu mother goddess Parvati is nurturing, compassionate, and benevolent, while Durga, a manifestation of Parvati, is a terrifying, protective, and destructive warrior goddess. The masks of comedy and tragedy symbolize the extremes of human experience, the push and pull of duality, the gap between the people we are and the people we wish to be.

POKER FACE

During the 2016 presidential debates, a *Newsweek* article noted that Hillary Clinton used "her grandmother smile" to avoid what is known as "resting bitch face," a default facial expression that unintentionally makes people appear angry or annoyed. In the article, psychologist and body language expert Elizabeth Kuhnke states that women are expected to smile more than men and are often told to cheer up, noting that "no man would ever be at fault for having a serious look on his face ... the resting bitch face doesn't exist for men because it is simply a face of authority."

Women with this type of default facial expression include Queen Elizabeth, Kristen Stewart, Victoria Beckham, and Anna Kendrick, all, I suspect, who are like me: shy or reserved at heart.

GAME FACE

My husband has remarked that at times my face looks scary. Other times, he's accused me of being angry when I'm not. A woman I was travelling with once called me ferocious, a remark that so stunned me I spent the next several hours examining why I came across that way. What is this anger that others see in the unpredictable mask of my face?

"You look like you'd like to rip someone's head off," someone at work once remarked. I wasn't particularly annoyed right then. Or maybe a little.

Of course, there is anger in me, plenty of it. Perhaps more than I realize. A sediment of ancient pain that swirls up when disturbed.

A friend once commented that at times she felt like a skunk. I understood it to mean that she caused a stink by voicing an unpopular opinion or giving off a bad vibe that caused people to steer clear. When I express a level of intensity that others find too extreme, that makes them uncomfortable, that is somehow unacceptable, I, too, feel like a skunk.

Solitary and mellow, skunks move slowly and are easy prey for predators. Reluctant warriors, they're confrontational only when threatened. They issue repeated warnings before spraying a noxious odour, their only security, their lone weapon, used only as a last resort.

I've worked hard, learned to control my temper and soften my emotional responses for the sake of my loved ones and to make my life easier. The anger that flares up, sometimes unexpectedly, must be managed, must be forced down like an overstuffed suitcase, sat on 'til it's squeezed down tight, clasps snapped shut, bulging at the seams but contained. No one deserves to be on the other end of my anger because it has nothing to do with them. Perhaps I'm a skunk even if I don't spray anymore, marked by an invisible white stripe down my back.

IN YOUR FACE

But there's a part of me that occasionally wants to rebel against the pressure to smile when I don't feel

like it, that rails against having to tone down my emotions for public consumption.

In Tim Burton's film *Alice in Wonderland*, the Mad Hatter tells Alice, "You're not the same as you were before. You used to be much ... muchier. You've lost your muchness." I, too, have lost my muchness. And there are times when I want it back. When I long to bust out of the social constraints on my behaviour and become the version of me that I don't allow myself to be. To be exactly as angry and ferocious as I sometimes feel. What would happen if I let out all the anger? What harm would it do to unleash it? I fear that it would hurt me more than anyone else. The guilt of it like lava, incinerating me to the core.

FACE DOWN

I was walking with a friend one day when a car made a sharp left turn at high speed, wheels squealing, and almost ran us over. The driver parked, and when the four young guys in the car jumped out, three of them were laughing. My friend was quiet, in shock, but I reacted with anger.

"You're laughing?" I yelled. "You could have killed us." The driver looked me in the eyes.

"I'm not laughing," he said.

His obvious contrition conjured a kind of magic trick, and in an instant my fiery anger calmed, disappeared in a puff of smoke. Later, my friend told me she was nervous when I confronted them. That she'd never seen me like that.

"I get angry when I'm frightened," I said.

Like a skunk, mild-mannered until threatened.

BLUE IN THE FACE

There's sadness in me, too. There always has been. Recently, after looking through an album of childhood photographs, I mentioned to my sister that I rarely smiled.

"You weren't very happy," she said.

There's a self-portrait I took when I was in my early twenties. Weighed down by worry over my alcoholic parents and in the wake of their divorce, I remember struggling to remake myself into the carefree young woman I thought I should be. All the photographs from this period have the same sorrowful eyes and hauntingly impassive look that gives nothing away, that seems hard to penetrate. That I recognize still.

FACE PLANT

Two months after 9/11, when we were all trying to adjust to the new normal, my beloved mother died suddenly and unexpectedly, catapulting me into a period of impenetrable darkness. It was in those years of profound grief and illness that I came to a life-altering realization—that although I might be happy again, I would never again be as happy in this world without my mother. Although the dark cloud of grief eventually lifted, the belief that I would never again be truly happy persisted for a time until, with intense effort and faltering steps, I crawled back into the light and learned that I could be.

A few years ago, when I lost three loved ones to cancer, multiple organ failure, and old age, someone remarked that I took people's deaths very hard. Do some people find it easier? Perhaps, for me, the loss of one of my inner-circle folks feels like having a brick removed from my foundation, an erosion of a stable base that leaves me teetering. Perhaps the remoteness of grief has not yet left me, will never leave me, and it's gone underground, hovering just below the surface of my skin. Perhaps that's what has been written on my face all these years.

FACE TIME

Our faces are masks that we can't remove at will. Or can we? What would I look like if people could see me as I am inside? There's something different about photographs of me taken by my son. In them, my expression is open and soft, my smile warm and wide, lit by love. I find myself wanting to look that way more of the time.

My eyebrows tend to furrow when I concentrate. The facial feedback hypothesis postulates that a person's facial expression directly affects their emotional experience. Just as your brain notices when the zygomatic muscles of your smile are flexed and thinks you're happy, the corrugator supercilii muscle, which furrows your brow, tells your brain you're angry, worried, or other negative emotions. I wondered, if the facial feedback hypothesis is correct, instead of smiling because I'm happy, could I feel happy because I smiled?

Several years ago, I decided to be more mindfully aware of my facial expressions. I began by consciously relaxing my furrowed brows and smiling at the people I passed when I was out walking, at shopkeepers, or while driving. Most people smiled back. I travelled to the western border of the state of Gujarat, a region of

India not frequented by tourists, and where I could only communicate non-verbally. Each morning, I reminded myself to smile with my teeth, a bigger and broader smile than usual. The results were remarkable. People smiled back with disarming warmth and directness. When I parted from my travelling companions a few weeks later, one man said, "It was lovely to see your smile every day."

FACIAL RECOGNITION

In the early days of the pandemic, when I first wore a mask, I didn't bother to smile on my long walks around the neighbourhood, as no one could see it. Then I discovered that just as smiling with your teeth conveys a message of friendliness, smiling with your eyes works too, and I smiled at passersby with my teeth and my eyes as I said *hello, good morning, good afternoon, nice day*. Sometimes I received an uncomprehending stare or a wary retreat, but, more often than not, I encountered folks whose smiles suddenly lit up their faces, whose eyes expressed an acknowledgement of shared experience, a brief and transitory and welcome moment of human contact in a frightening and unfamiliar world.

FACE TO FACE

Over the years, I've grown more comfortable with the duality my face expresses, embraced the discomfort at having my lived experience exposed to the world. I know and understand that we can't have happiness without knowing sadness, see the light without struggling with the dark, know non-anger without feeling angry.

And although it happens less frequently these days, those times when a disconnect occurs, when my face becomes a stranger, remains a puzzling mystery. It may be that my face has a default position it reverts to, an out-of-date habit of expression that has not yet been unlearned. What's most frustrating to me about that face is that it doesn't reflect the work I've done, the progress I've made. It doesn't honour how much more light is in me now. All I can do is continue to seek congruity between my inside and outside selves. Strive to close the gap between how I feel and how I look. Revise the story my face tells. In the mirror, mirroring.

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